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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 190 (2015) 339 – 345

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

2nd GLOBAL CONFERENCE on PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCHES, 28-29, November 2014

Experienced military officer's perception of important character strengths

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Abstract

Problem statement: Military officers educated from the Norwegian Military Academy are expected to become leaders in military international operations. Leadership in these contexts will demand a high degree of intellect and character. However, there is a lack of systematic research on which specific character strengths that are crucial to possess for military officers to succeed in international operations. **Purpose of study:** This paper discusses a group of experienced officer's perception of which character strengths are deemed most important for the Norwegian Military Academy's officers to succeed. **Method:** A group of participants consisting of 25 experienced military officers were given a list of 24 character strengths. They were requested to judge each character strength according to its importance for military officers. **Findings and results:** 12 character strengths were selected as the most important for military officers and their leadership. These were in ranked order: Leadership, integrity, persistence, bravery, open-mindedness, fairness, citizenship, self-regulation, love of learning, social intelligence, perspective and creativity. **Conclusions and recommendations:** These 12 character strengths were the same 12 identified as important for military officers in another study conducted at the NMA. It was therefore decided that these 12 selected character strengths will function as the basis for the development of an instrument for observing character strengths during military field exercises.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Research and Education Center.

Keywords: Character; character strengths; military; education

1. Introduction

Norwegian military officers will most certainly face both challenging and demanding situations during their chosen career. These situations are also known as "in extremis" leadership (Kolditz, 2010) or the unforeseen (Torgersen, Steiro, & Saeverot, 2013). The Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) has educated military officers

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since 1750 (Hosar, 2000). One of the aims of the education is to ensure that the officers have what it takes to face challenging and demanding situations while leading others (Boe et al., 2014). Because of the current conflict pattern with contributions to international military operation, it is important for the NMA to ensure that graduating officers have what it takes to be able to face and cope with these types of situations. Research conducted at the NMA has postulated that the officers (referred to as cadets while being students at the NMA) should therefore have sufficient subject matter expertise, social proficiency, and personal foundation so that they can exercise leadership also in this type of situations (Boe, in press a; Boe, in press b; Boe, in press c; Boe, 2013; 2014). In a conceptual description of officer development at the NMA it is stated that this will demand a solid character (Boe, Eldal, Hjortmo, Lilleng, & Kjørstad, 2014; Boe et al., 2014).

The NMAs counterpart in the US, the US military academy West Point, has stated that its mission is to educate "commissioned leaders of character" (Doty & Joiner, 2009). However, this might be easier said than done, as the U.S. Army doctrine does not describe how to develop character by soldiers and officers, but only describes that it is important (Snider, 2011). A parallel can be seen here to the Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine (NAFJOD) (Forsvarets Stabsskole, 2007) and the Norwegian Chief of Defence view on leadership in the military (Forsvaret, 2012) who describe the desired properties of an officer, but does not directly describe how these properties will be developed. Serving as a leader in military operations thus demands exceptional skills and abilities, but how these abilities or skills should be developed is still unclear. An important step is therefore to investigate certain characteristics that military leaders should encompass. One such characteristic has been referred to as "the ability to keep one's head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion" (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). Using Clausewitz interpretation of this ability, this ability can be described as character or character strengths. He further stated that "A strong character is one that will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions". General major Joshua L. Chamberlain at Gettysburg in 1898 described character as the following: "What I mean by character is a firm seasoned substance of soul. I mean such qualities or acquirements as intelligence, thoughtfulness, conscientiousness, right-mindedness, patience, fortitude, long-suffering and unconquerable resolve" (Chamberlain cited in Tsouras, 2000).

Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, (2011) claims that character strengths can be developed through increased awareness and effort. They also state that character strengths are specific phenomenon that co-exists with goals, interests, and values. Research at the NMA during a combat fatigue course revealed that cadets lost both their situation awareness and their ability to focus on certain missions while being sleep deprived (Matthews, Eid, Johnsen, & Boe, 2011; Matthews, Martinez, Eid, Johnsen, & Boe, 2007). Avoiding this will be important for a military officer during a mission. Working on developing certain character strengths may be a way of countering these types of incidents. It has been shown that having character and commitment has proved to be successful factors during selection of Special Forces units (Boe, 2011; Boe, Woolley, & Durkin, 2011). But which character strengths that are the most important ones for military officers is still a work in progress. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate which character strengths experienced military officers consider to be the most important for a military officer.

2. The 24 character strengths

Peterson and Seligman (2004) present the development of a classification scheme of 24 character strengths and 6 virtues. They suggest that these character strengths and virtues are ubiquitously valued across cultures. Virtues represent "core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13) and are thought to be universal in the human species. Character strengths are "the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define virtues" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). The 6 virtues are respectively wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Under each virtue one will find the character strengths that are related to the specific virtue. The virtue wisdom and knowledge deal with cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge. Here one finds the character strengths *creativity* [originality, ingenuity], *curiosity* [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience], *open-mindedness* [judgment, critical thinking], *love of learning* [mastering new skills] and perspective [wisdom]. The second virtue courage entails emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal. Included in this virtue are the character strengths *bravery* [valor], *persistence* [perseverance, industriousness], *integrity* [authenticity, honesty] and *vitality* [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]. The third virtue

revolves around humanity, that is, interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others. Here one finds the character strengths *love*: [Valuing close relations with others], *kindness* [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, niceness] and *social intelligence* [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]. The fourth virtue deals with justice meaning civic strengths that underlie healthy community life, and here we find *citizenship* [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork], *fairness* [treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice] and *leadership*: [encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done]. The fifth virtue is taking into account temperance, meaning strengths that protect against excess, and included in this virtue are the following character strengths; *Forgiveness and mercy*, *Humility/Modesty*, *Prudence* [Being careful about one's choices] and *Self-regulation* [self-control] [Regulating what one feels and does]. The sixth and final virtue is transcendence, that is, strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning. In this virtue we find *appreciation of beauty and excellence* [awe, wonder, elevation], *gratitude*, *hope* [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation], *humor* [playfulness] and *spirituality* [religiousness, faith, purpose]. For a more elaborated explanation of the 24 character strengths, see Peterson and Seligman (2004).

According to Doty and Sowden (2009), integrating the development of character in all ongoing training of soldiers in the US Army is important. This means to encourage moral development among soldiers in order to enhance the military results. In the USMC magazine "the Gazette" from June 1919, the basic principles of morality is laid out, so these thought are not new. The basic principles of morality were respect, confidence (confidence), contentment, harmony and pride, and these traits were designated as the foundation of all morality (Jenkins, 1919).

2.1. Previous research on important character strengths for military officers

Previous research at the NMA has revealed that certain character strengths are viewed as more important than other character strengths (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a). Boe, Nilsen and Bang found that an expert group involved with a research project on character in military leaders at the NMA selected 9 out of the 24 character strengths defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as the most important for a military officer. The expert group selected the character strengths leadership, integrity, persistence, bravery, citizenship, open-mindedness, social intelligence, self-regulation, and creativity as the most important for a military officer. The remaining 15 character strengths were not considered to be equally important to succeed as an officer. A second group consisting of military employees at the NMA, were asked to rate each of the 24 character strengths on a 5 point scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). This group chose 9 of the same character strengths as the project group to be the most important; respectively in falling order from the most important: leadership, integrity, persistence, bravery, citizenship, open-mindedness, social intelligence, self-regulation, and creativity.

In addition, the military employees chose 3 other character strengths as important, respectively fairness, love of learning and perspective. In total 12 character strengths were found to be important in total by the two groups, consisting of the 9 character strengths found in both groups, and the 3 additional character strengths chosen by the military employees. The character strengths hope, forgiveness and mercy, kindness, curiosity, vitality, humility/modesty, prudence, humor, love, and gratitude were given lower mean values by the military employees. The character strengths beauty and excellence and spirituality clearly stood out as the least important character strengths for military officers (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a). When asked to rate themselves on the 24 character strengths, spirituality was found to be given the lowest score by Norwegian naval officers (Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, & Peterson, 2006).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants consisted of 25 experienced military officers taking part in a 6 month officer course at the NMA. They had served on average 8.1 years in the military, and most of them had served in the Norwegian Army.

3.2. Materials

Participants were given a paper version of Peterson and Seligmans (2004) 24 character strengths' questionnaire during a classroom discussion at the NMA on leadership. The questionnaire was translated into Norwegian (Bang, 2014). A short definition of each of the character strengths was included in the questionnaire. The participants were requested to rate the importance of each character strength for a military leader on a scale ranging from 1 ("not important") to 5 ("very important"). The higher score that was given to a specific character strength, the more important this character strength would be considered to be.

3.3. Analyses

The answers that the participants gave to the questionnaires were analysed using SPSS 22.0. In order to differentiate between important and less important character strengths a cut-off point of 4.00 was used in the analyses. A score of 4.00 or higher meant that the character strength would be "important" on a scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

4. Findings and Results

Table 1 gives an overview over the participant's ranking of the 24 character strengths. Table 1 reveals that the participants gave 12 of the 24 character strengths a score of 4.00 or higher. The most important character strength was leadership, followed by integrity, persistence, bravery, open-mindedness, fairness, citizenship, self-regulation, love of learning, social intelligence, perspective and creativity. The scores in table 1 corroborate previous findings that the exact same 12 character strengths were chosen to be important by another group of military officers (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a). Sweeney et al. (2009) have also reported that military leaders with humor as a character strength could predict their followers trust. Our results did not correlate with this finding, as humor was not seen as very important by our participants. According to Sweeney et al. followers with the character strength perspective earned their leaders' trust. Here our results corroborate better with Sweeney et al. (2009) as the character strength perspective was found by our participants to be important.

Table 1. Mean values and standard deviations for the 24 character strengths (n=25).

Character strengths	M	SD
1. Leadership	4.92	0.28
2. Integrity	4.76	0.52
3. Persistence	4.76	0.44
4. Bravery	4.76	0.52
5. Open-mindedness	4.76	0.44
6. Fairness	4.52	0.59
7. Citizenship	4.46	0.58
8. Self-regulation	4.32	0.75
9. Love of learning	4.24	0.52
10. Social intelligence	4.20	0.76
11. Perspective	4.08	0.64
12. Creativity	4.00	0.58
13. Hope	3.88	0.67
14. Curiosity	3.84	0.75
15. Kindness	3.80	0.87
16. Humility/Modesty	3.72	0.79
17. Forgiveness and mercy	3.72	0.89
18. Vitality	3.68	0.69
19. Humor	3.64	0.70

20. Prudence	3.52	0.82
21. Gratitude	3.36	0.81
22. Love	2.84	0.69
23. Appreciation of beauty and excellence	2.76	0.97
24. Spirituality	2.16	0.94

The finding that our participants perceived the character strength integrity to be the second most important character strength for a military officer resonates well with our previous research (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a) as well as with research conducted by Sosik, Gentry, and Chun (2012). Sosik, Gentry and Chun investigated the strengths of honesty/integrity, bravery, perspective, and social intelligence in relation to top-level executive leaders of for-profit companies. They found that each of these strengths was important for performance but the character strength honesty/integrity had the most contribution in explaining variance when it came to executive performance. Honesty/integrity and bravery were also perceived by our participants to be very important character strengths for military officers. However, in our study social intelligence and perspective were regarded as the 10th and the 11th most important character strength. All in all, one might see a pattern of character strengths that would be considered important across different professions. Getting people to trust you is perhaps not so different in military life than in the corporate sector.

Money, Hillenbrand, and Camara (2008) has found that character strengths expressed at work were in rank order the following: honesty, judgment, perspective, fairness, perseverance, love of learning, leadership, zest, curiosity, and social intelligence. Our results indicated that several of the same character strengths were chosen by our participants. Our participants also chose honesty (labeled as integrity in our paper), judgment (labeled as open-mindedness in our paper), perspective, love of learning, fairness, perseverance, leadership and social intelligence as important character strengths. This lends credibility to the notion that there may exist several common character strengths that are perceived to be important in work situations, regardless of context. Zest and curiosity were however not considered important by our participants. These character strengths were neither chosen by two other groups at the NMA in a previous study (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a). This might reflect the Norwegian military's lack of emphasis on using these words in its education and selection of officers.

In Money, Hillenbrand, and Camara's study from 2008, religiousness/spirituality, appreciation of beauty/excellence, love, bravery, and modesty/humility were found to be the bottom 5 character strengths expressed at work. The character strengths religiousness/spirituality, appreciation of beauty/excellence, love, and modesty/humility were not chosen by our participants, nor by two other groups at the NMA in a previous study (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a). We consider this lack of emphasis on these character strengths as a reflection of officers' perception of what a military officer should be. Therefore these character strengths might be perceived as unimportant. However, bravery was ranked as the fourth most important character strength by our participants as well as by the military group in the previous study by Boe, Nilsen, and Bang (in press a). A possible explanation for this might be the strong emphasis on bravery in the Norwegian Armed forces during military education. Bravery is also mentioned as a core element of in the governing Norwegian military doctrine the NAFJOD from 2007 (Forsvarets Stabsskole, 2007).

The results from our study enhanced the notion that 12 of the 24 character strengths are important for military officers. Since both our previous study (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a) and the present study came up with the exact same list of important character strengths, it was decided at the NMA that these character strengths would be the starting point for the development of a field instrument. The field instrument will later be used at the NMA in order to observe cadets and to observe and measure the 12 character strengths during different military field exercises (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press b).

5. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to investigate which character strengths a group of experienced military officers considered the most important for a military officer to succeed. The officers were given a questionnaire containing 24 character strengths and were requested to rate each character strength on a scale from 1 ("not important") to 5 ("very important"). The results revealed that 12 of the 24 character strengths were given a score of 4.00 or higher,

indicating that these character strengths was considered as especially important. Leadership was found to be the most and spirituality the least important character strength. The 12 most important character strengths matches the 12 most important strengths identified in a previous study (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press a). One might conclude that there seems to be a tendency among Norwegian military officers as to which character strengths are viewed as the most important for a military officer. The results in this paper thus strengthen the decision to use the 12 character strengths to develop an instrument with the purpose of observing character strengths during military field exercises (Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, in press b).

Acknowledgements

This research work was supported by the Norwegian Military Academy. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not represent an official position by the Norwegian Army. The authors also wish to thank dr. Annabel Drew for valuable assistance with proof reading the language of this paper.

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